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ABSTRACT

Power relations between professors and graduate students are fluid, in many ways under continuous negotiation. This is especially true in electronically mediated interchanges. Although a professor's power and authority far from disappear in a MOO (multi-user object-oriented domain) session, the power and influence of the students rise to challenge it. MOO discourse releases liminal energies, a disorder that is productive because it allows for pushing the boundaries of academic discoursing. MOO conferencing produces a situation that encourages the expression of multiple personas and multiple, often controversial perspectives. This paper uses the anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of liminality (defined as a state of being in between two stable positions) to discuss the synchronous MOO discourse between an instructor and 12 graduate students in a computers and writing seminar in the English department at Ohio University. A number of contextual elements of this seminar contributed to making liminality a useful frame for viewing the MOO discourse. The mix of students, the course topics, and the intensity of conversation in the MOO created a situation conducive to the playful exploration of liminal personas and issues, issues germane to the transition from graduate student to professional. It explains that these issues included the conflict between rhetoric/composition and literary studies, the goals of composition instruction, the desirability of academic discourse, and tenure. In discussing Turner's concept of liminality, the course itself was in a sense about liminal literacies and the current hybrid stage of rhetoric and textuality, the liminal zone between print and digitally based media and teaching. The full range of discourse practiced in the seminar, from face-to-face through e-mail listserv, MOO, formal essay, and hypertext, foregrounds the liminal nature of current literacies. (NKA)

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By

Albert Rouzie

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Electronic Discourses in a Graduate Seminar: MOO Conferences as Liminal Discursive Spaces

This year I was invited to present a paper at a smali colloquium in Sweden. Only later I found out that I was on the program with three authors of important books on hypertext and cybermedia. Given the overstated label of "expert" in online conferencing by the colloquium coordinator, I suddenly experienced cognitive dissonance over my image. I was still thinking of myself as in transition from the cocoon of graduate study into the bright light of professional academia, and a voice inside kept saying "You're not worthy." Five or so years this side of graduate school, I recall the mystification that surrounded my perceptions of professional academic life and work, and I think about how the graduate students in the seminar that is the subject of this paper are positioned in a transitional process toward something they conceive of in only sketchy terms. As neither solely students nor truly professionals, graduate students share many elements of anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of liminality, which he defines as a state of being in between two stable positions. The liminal status of graduate students brings with it both freedom and constraints, confers them with power and limits their power.

No longer in the cocoon of graduate school, I am, rather, a moth circling the searing flame of tenure. In relation to my graduate students, I am not liminal. The architectural elements of our building say that I am the initiator, they the initiands. Despite this, the power relations between us are fluid, in many ways under continuous negotiation. This is especially true in electronically-mediated interchanges. Although my power and authority far from disappear in a MOO session, the power and influence of the students rise to challenge mine. MOO discourse releases liminal energies, a

disorder that is productive because it allows for pushing the boundaries of academic discoursing. MOO conferencing produces a situation that encourages the expression of multiple personas and multiple, often controversial perspectives.

In this paper I use Turner's concept of liminality to discuss the synchronous MOO discourse of myself and 12 graduate students in a winter 1999 computers and writing seminar in the English department at Ohio University. A number of contextual elements of this seminar contributed to making liminality a useful frame for viewing the MOO discourse. Five of 12 students were in our rhetoric and composition concentration with the rest representing creative writing and literary history. Our class met the first hour in a traditional seminar room and the second hour in a computer lab with full internet access, creating a stark contrast between the dynamics of discourse in each space. The mix of students, the course topics, and the intensity of conversation in the MOO created a situation conducive to the playful exploration of liminal personas and issues, issues germane to the transition from graduate student to professional. These issues included, among others, the conflict between rhetoric and composition and literary studies, the goals of composition instruction, the desirability of academic discourse, and tenure.

Liminality describes not only the status of graduate students, but also the discourse situation of synchronous conferencing, which opens a field for critique of the institution they're joining. The course itself was in a sense about liminal literacies, about our current hybrid stage of rhetoric and textuality, the liminal zone between print and digitally-based media and teaching. The full range of discourse practiced in the seminar, from face to face through email listserv, MOO, formal essay, and hypertext, foregrounds the liminal nature of current literacies.

Turner bases his concept of liminality on the quality of certain ritual rites of passage and initiation in traditional, pre-industrial societies. People in liminal experiences:

- are between assigned positions, in social limbo, in passage from one socio-cultural state to another;
- are resistant to classification due to a blurring and merging of distinctions
- are free to contemplate a multiplicity of social positions;
- are "released from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of the 'uninteresting' constructions of common sense . . . into cultural units which may then be reconstituted in novel ways."

The essence of liminality is, according to Turner, "the free or ludic recombination of cultural factors in any and every possible pattern, however weird." This provides an anti-structural force, a latent system of potential alternatives for countering the working equilibrium of the normative structure. The play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith asserts that ritual disorder such as *carnival* may arise to let off steam built up by the restrictions of normative structures OR they may develop "because we have something to *learn* through being disorderly." Both Turner and Sutton-Smith view liminal situations as "the settings in which new models, symbols, paradigms, etc. arise—as the seedbeds of cultural creativity." Traditional ritual accepts the ludic element as integral to the work of living in close communion with others similarly initiated. As sociologist Erving Goffman said, all the world may not be a stage, but it is difficult to explain the ways in which it is not. This suggests that the play of MOO discourse shouldn't be seen as divorced from reality. MOO discourse is just separate enough from normative reality to offer license for freedom, but connected to the real in how it reflects and affects it. The

combination of the serious and the ludic, what I call serio-ludic discourse, thrived in the MOO sessions.

What goes on in this eruptive space can be seen most clearly as a performative, workshop-rehearsal process. The drama theorist, Richard Schechner, who both influenced and was influenced by Turner, describes this process in terms of Winnicott's "transitional phenomena," where the subject "recognizes some things and situations as 'not me . . . not not me' (110). Schechner notes that "within this field or frame of double negativity [both] choice and virtuality remain activated." Play in liminal space, Schechner continues, "itself deconstructs actuality in a 'not me . . . not not me' way. The hierarchies that usually set off actualities as 'real' and fantasy as 'not real' are dissolved for the 'time being,' the play time" (110). Turner makes the connection between play and liminality explicit. Status, position, and identity are at play in liminal spaces—that is what defines liminality. So play is a defining characteristic of liminality—Liminal people are temporarily freer to express resistance to the positions they aspire to—they can try on identities in real/unreal ways and use parody to reflect upon the positions they straddle.

The immediacy of MOO conversation lends itself to ensemble performances, group improvisational riffs that develop over the course of many sessions, and some decentering of instructor authority. What is gained by turning control of a discussion over to graduate students? In the MOO sessions, there was substantive discussion of course texts and issues of concern to the students—many sessions were engaged, intelligent, multi-threaded conversations on and across the course texts; still, there is no guarantee of "covering" certain points. Some sessions, especially the one whole-class pseudonymous "secession," zig-zagged from the serious to the outrageous. I return to Sutton-Smith's idea that "we have something to *learn* through being

disorderly," and I want to suggest that what goes on in place of the ritual of order we may be accustomed to in the traditional graduate seminar is not simply chaotic or disorderly, but is a newly emergent ritual of disorder from which arises many positive potentialities.

As I mentioned, an issue germane to graduate student liminality, the conflict between rhetoric/composition and the hegemony of literary studies, was discussed in some MOO sessions. Since almost half were rhet/comp students, this conflicted topic was inevitable. A graduate student's position on, say, whether rhetoric and composition ought to secede from English departments carries less weight than that same position held by a professor. Even removed from the consequences, each must still imagine a future in which they take a stance. In the MOO transcript excerpt on the handout, a small group discusses the split and reading this, you can see alternative futures being constructed from the elements of the present. The real point of conflict for the rhet/comp students (particularly Heathen and Robinhood) is whether literature students are willing to "learn the discourse" and theories of the rhetoric and composition discipline. Thom and Quig, the two lit students, go to some lengths at establishing common ground, except for committing to learning the discourse. They learn that one ultimate solution is secession, which they oppose. As orderly as this discussion was, it was not devoid of ludic riffs that served to relieve the pressure, while also commenting on the conflict:

> Chip puts in a CD of "Fiddler on the Roof", looks at Sheebs, and shouts along with the music, "Tradition!"

Quig takes this as a cue: Quig says, "the hell with tradition! let's start a war! just kidding." Quig's hyperbole reveals his anxiety over dicey topics, marked by the classic just kidding disclaimer. Eventually, Chip turns off the fiddler CD to the relief of some

listeners. What tradition Chip invokes with the fiddler on the roof theme is ambiguous. Is the conflict between rhetoric/composition and literature now a tradition? Or is the enduring weight of the literary past the tradition? In any case, through the ability to enact such dramas, the MOO creates expressive opportunities simply unavailable around a seminar table.

The issue of the privileging of literary over rhetoric and composition studies in the Ohio University English department is a power issue that structures the lives of professors. Other power issues concern graduate students in their liminal position. As they are exposed to academic discourses and asked to write them, some revolt against the perceived stuffiness, elitism and specialized jargon of the language. The expressive freedom the students felt in the MOO and in email intensified this feeling, making the issue a natural for discussion in these venues. In our pseudonymous session, this theme emerged along with an ironic riff on oppression. This begins when one student, Armand in the MOO, says "Let's oppress punkrockgirl," another MOO character. Punkrockgirl exclaims "I'm already oppressed!" adding, "I'm comp/rhet." The unthreatening, ironic quality of mutual oppression in the MOO is underscored when Tomato exclaims, "I'm in favor of oppressing anyone that we can oppress—I don't get out much!" Armand takes up the call, saying that "E-mail's oppressive, " which prompts herbie to ask "How is e-mail oppressive?" This playful beginning leads into a discussion of the place of email in formal essays for courses, its potential role in introducing a more conversational tone to academic discourse, and the burden of email quantity. Poopy begins a series of messages on this topic, saying that "e-mail discourse is poopy" before making a serious statement:

> Yes, I really think it would add CLARITY to have a paper with e-mail discourse, no more hiding behind fancy shmancy articulations.

Asked how the department would react, Poopy says "The rest of the department would react by reading it and thinking how brilliant I was." The exaggerated unreality of this gesture does not make it beside the point: rather, it is the point. In this playful statement lies a challenge to all linguistic stuffed shirts that this student's argument against fancy shmancy articulations would itself impress peers and professors as brilliant. This sort of resistance to the conventions of the institution arises more freely in the MOO and is fully expected from those who inhabit liminal zones.

Armand brings oppression back, this time in connection with fancy articulations: "Hyperjargon is oppressive." The riff continues through the technique of "emoting," a way that characters in a MOO can present what they are thinking to others: "Rorshach suddenly feels like tearing down the structures of hyperjargon. Damn the man!" The reference to "the man" then gets repeated in various other messages.

The more serious side of the discussion surfaces again with sasha's question:

> Why be oppressed, you victims of language? Why not rejoice in the game of movement, compromise, and drive of language?

Punkrockgirl responds that to take the position that specialized language use oppresses us "kind of let's us off the hook . . . means that we don't have to understand it"; this brings back the issue Heathen and robinhood raised earlier in the discussion of the power differential of composition and literature. Are you willing to talk the talk? Substantive discussion continues but is punctuated by frenzied improvisations on the theme of oppression.

In this mixture of serious and ludic discourse, the students accomplish a number of things: they defy the expectation of serious academic discourse through irreverent humor and roleplay, and in doing so, they dramatize the liminal tensions of being students becoming professionals. Their refusal is not absolute, since they also

accomplish substantive discussion, in mostly impassioned, dramatically overplayed MOO improvisation. The riff they develop around the oppression/expression theme resurfaced during later discussions. The students demonstrate that they are adept at serio-ludic discourse, a quintessentially liminal form, since it is by definition positioned between two social languages. This doubleness suggests reflexive awareness of the performative nature of the discussion. At one point, a student reveals this:

> Rosa is having a lot of ludic fun here not caring too much about the efficiency of our gathering

In this pseudonymous session, I (as Mylar) reinforce the riffing, while attempting to facilitate discussion at the same time. Partly, I do this to avoid being outed as the instructor, while still performing some vestige of my directive role:

> Mylar asks, "our fearless leader oppressed us with a question about the binary opp of functional vs creative uses of hypertext. Possible crossovers I think it was. Any ideas?

This prompt helped focus the session on some issues in hypertext rhetoric brought up by the assigned reading, including the definition and role of various literacies--functional, visual, and critical—in the teaching of written composition.

This pseudonymous session was a turning point in the class. Prior to this, there were many ludic moments, but they were fewer and less sustained. After this session, although we returned to real names, the free, somewhat outrageous spirit of this session continued and made MOO discussion a rich mixture of serious and ludic discourse. The pseudonymous session played an important role in allowing the students to give freer rein to their expression. Temporarily stepping out of their real life roles allowed them to step outside of normal constraints, to employ ludic disruption appropriate to their liminal status,

Graduate students are uniquely positioned in a transitional process of initiation. What are we initiating them into? Do we want to encourage the 'not me . . .not not me" experimentation in the liminal zones of our graduate courses? If so, the media with which we engage graduate students in this exploration obviously has some effect on how this might proceed. Listserv and face to face discussions help to anchor expression in the purposively academic business of reading and critiquing texts and ideas; but another, more ludic, more intensely liminal dimension can erupt to positive effect with extended use of synchronous conferencing such as in a MOO.